CAPTAIN GEORGE'S

Penny Dreadful

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A WEEKLY REVIEW

DON MILLER

LOST EAGLES ARE ODD BIRDS: According to the February 27 P. D., our intrepid Republic chronicler Jack Mathis has narrowed it down to four features among the missing -- a measly four. Pretty good going, I'll say. Tell you something, though -- should he never find the errant quartet he won't be missing too much. Fact is, three of them are Republics only by invitation, since they were manufactured outside the Republic realm. However, since the proposed book on Republic is to contain every sprocket hole connected with the company, here's what's being looked for.

The Flying Squadron: A jim-dandy title hooked on to an Italian import that apparently was sliced down considerably from its original running time. With characteristic Republic neatness of the time, it ran an even sixty minutes, as did everything else released by the studio. The cutting did some funny things to the plot, or plots, since there were several, all borrowed from previous aerial dramas. You've got the war widow under the delusion that her husband wasn't killed and will return; the understanding service chaplain; the dashing pilots who join to run an airport as a training ground for young aviators; the young cadet with the weak ticker who's rejected; Two Pilots In Love With The Same Girl; the dangerous, fateful test in a glider; and a lot of other stuff, all in an hour. Republic doctored up a few other Italian jobs too, to a similar lack of impact. Anyway, this one had some good native actors like Massimo Serato, Andrea Checchi (the Italian Paul Kelly), Gabriele Ferzetti and Umberto Spadaro. The youngster with heart trouble was played by Mirko Ellis, a name I am taken with. Tipoff -- even the camerawork doesn't amount to much. Released March, 1953. Incidentally, some of the dubbed voices might be recognizable.

Fugitive Lady: Mike Frankovich produced it in Italy. Frankovich at one time produced serials for Republic, and in comparison his chapter-plays are preferable by far. Better Jesse James Rides Again, The Black Widow and G-Men Never Forget than the sub-par Double Indemnity-type melodramatics at hand. At least the serials had Roy Barcroft. Here you have Eduardo Ciannelli as a wealthy murder victim, and you know right off that the casting is faulty on account of Ciannelli is usually planting people himself instead of being victimized. Onward. It looks like an accident but a snooping private eye thinks otherwise, and he's right, of course. Which isn't difficult to figure, because when you get an old coot hitched to a dish like Janis Paige, something's gotta give. Especially since it turns out that she's got Massimo Serato (see The Flying Squadron, above) stashed around as a backup team. Eventually she gets hers and everybody goes home or waits for the main feature to start.

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Probably cheaper to make in Italy then, but it could've been done on the back lot on this side. Maybe better. Also in the cast is Binnie Barnes, who is also Mrs. Mike Frankovich. The directing-writing combo of Sidney Salkow-John O'Dea collaborated on several local productions. They didn't maintain their average with their European jaunt. Released July, 1951.

Alibi. This is one of those bad movies that it's possible to write a lot about, if so inclined, because there are so many interesting people in the cast, and the director had a reputation of sorts for making intriguing material, and the original story had some promise. What evolved was pretty much of a mess, but it's still interesting. I wouldn't mind watching it again, knowing full well I'd regret it afterward. The plot gimmick is neat -- it concerns a cabaret performer, a mind reader, who murders a gangster, and proceeds to offer a night club hostess who needs the dough a chance to get out of debut if she will alibi for him. Most of the action takes place in a rather elaborate nitery setting. The story was written by Marcel Achard and filmed in France in 1938 by Pierre Chenal, titled L'Alibi. The girl with the alibi was played by Jany Holt; the wily cop who dogs the killer was Louis Jouvet, the young man who falls for the girl was Albert Prejean, and the wicked Prof. Winkler was none other than Erich von Stroheim, in a typically eccentric performance. Columbia released it here the following year. Josef Somlo produced the English remake for Gainsborough. It was directed by Brian Desmond Hurst and released in the U. K. August 10, 1942. Republic released it on these shores on March 24 of the following year. Margaret Lockwood, then the best-known name in the cast, was top billed as the alibi hostess. Hugh Sinclair, time off from his role as the English "Saint," had the policeman role. Prejean's part was assumed by James Mason, on the rise in England but still not popular here. The Stroheim pivotal part was taken by Raymond Lovell, who had made an impression in The 49th Parallel (The Invaders). Some twenty minutes shorter than its French counterpart, the narrative seemed to have lost something in the translation. For the original, while little more than a crime yarn, did have a good amount of realism in characterizations, which were rather artificial in the English remake. Republic sent it around to the action houses with the rest of their Western and serial product, where the English accents weren't appreciated. Aside from the main players, notable in the cast were the American singer Elizabeth Welch; the fascinating brunette Edana Romney, later to make Corridor of Mirrors; and Rodney Ackland, screenwriter, in the role of Lovell's devoted assistant.

The Oregon Trail: It isn't the best of the John Wayne early Republics -- I like King of the Pecos, but memory does play tricks. Anyway, it's on the slow side, but nothing you'd want to throw rocks at. The main problem is, how come it's missing? And reputedly has been missing for a long time. Never made it to TV, just vanished. Sunset Carson's Oregon Trail is around, but not this one. No relation in any case -- and neither have anything to do with Francis Parkman's classic history. Maybe somebody in the dark of night carried it over to Fox when they were producing their Oregon Trail with Fred MacMurray. Whatever -- good hunting. And now, Mr. Mathis, you'd better have good words to say about Affairs of Jimmy Valentine, Whispering Footsteps, Silent Partner and some others ...

PETE HARRIS

THE GARDEN OF TRIVIA: A name from Hollywood's past which crops up from time to time is the Garden of Allah, not the 1936 movie with Marlene Dietrich and Charles Boyer, but the hotel bungalow complex on Sunset Boulevard where a number of celebrities once lived for varying lengths of time, among them Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, John O'Hara, Robert Benchley, Greta Garbo, Errol Flynn, Buster Keaton, Orson Welles, Dietrich, Humphrey Bogart, Paul Whiteman, Artie Shaw and Woody Herman. Gone Hollywood (Doubleday) by Christopher Finch and Linda Rosenkrantz sums it up thus: "According to legend, life at the Garden of Allah was one long, drunken party, punctuated by Dorothy Parker aphorisms and the frequent splashes of John Barrymore falling into the pool (which was the largest in Hollywood)."

Nathaniel Benchley's biography of his father, Robert Benchley (McGraw-Hill, 1955) refers to the Garden of Allah a number of times, including this passage: "Most of the time, it was not necessary to leave the Garden of Allah to find entertainment. His bungalow was a meeting place for everybody he knew on the Coast, and also for a lot of people he didn't know. The bungalows at the Garden of Allah are so close together that one night a man, who went sleepily to get a glass of water at a woman's request, didn't realize until he got back into the empty bedroom that it was a woman in the next bungalow who had asked for the water. This proximity made it inevitable that every party, or small gathering, was known to everybody in the area, and people would often drop in just because it sounded as though somebody was having a good time."

In his autobiography, My Wicked, Wicked Ways, Errol Flynn mentions taking an apartment at the Garden of Allah, next door to Lili Damita.

The point of all this is that I had always accepted that particular spelling of "Allah" in that context. However, I recently discovered an advertisement in the Oct. 15, 1927, issue of a Hollywood trade paper, The Film Spectator, for the "Garden of Alla," at 8152 Sunset Blvd. "A residence at the Garden of Alla," the ad says, "implies distinction, prestige and luxurious comfort..." I was puzzled by the variation in spelling -- Allah or Alla -- but it wasn't until I read Gone Hollywood, the book mentioned above, that I finally figured out why the "Alla" in the ad. Oddly enough, Gone Hollywood refers to the place as the Garden of Allah, but goes on to say, "Built by silent star Alla Nazimova, in 1927, and opened with an eighteen-hour party, it soon became the temporary home of many Hollywood writers and some of the less inhibited stars." Hence the advertisement's spelling -- the name apparently was a play on Nazimova's first name.

Just another piece of movieland trivia, I suppose, but I think it's worthwhile to set the record straight on even such a minor item as that.